

THE DEVELOPMENT OF PLANT PROTEINS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Deputy Director General Mögele opened the conference presenting the Commission Report on the Development of Plant Proteins in the European Union, adopted by the college the same morning.

His keynote speech was followed by three panels. Each panel started with a summary of the main findings by the rapporteurs of the corresponding workshops on research and innovation, on agronomic practices and environmental benefits and on supply chains and market segments that took place in the course of 2018.

Panel on Research and Innovation

The different research fields for plant proteins were highlighted. For the audience and the panellists, genetic improvement – like breeding to improve yield and yield stability – as well as the adaptation to the diverse agro-climatic conditions in the EU emerged as the research areas with the greatest potential for the further development of EU protein plants. A better organisation of supply chains to improve competitiveness and the development of plant-based food innovations were also considered important. The panellists emphasized the crucial role plant proteins can play in ecosystem services stressing the benefits of pulses and protein crops in crop rotation. To fully exploit this potential there is a need to raise awareness among farmers and enhance knowledge transfer between farmers but also between researchers, breeders and farmers.

Panel on Agronomic practices and environmental benefits

In this session, the benefits of legumes in crop rotation (nitrogen fixing, breaking pest cycles, improved soil quality, higher yields for the subsequent crop) were discussed, as well as the benefits of intercropping. Conventional farmers could profit from the organic farmers' experience, for example in the areas of weed management, nutrient and soil management. One of the main questions discussed was how to better value the benefits of crop rotation. The panellists stressed the importance (but also the difficulty) of considering all factors when assessing the competitiveness and profitability of various crops and cropping systems. The discussions also raised the question whether intercropping can increase yields. The panel concluded that there was no environmental sustainability without economic sustainability.

Panel on Supply Chains and market segments

The plant protein market can be divided in a feed and food market. The most promising market segments for EU plant proteins are food and premium feed (e.g. non-GM and organic) segments, which, albeit still relatively small in size, record strong growth rates. Supply chains need to be further developed to create profit margins for all actors. The discussion focussed on the potential of the food segment and how this segment could create added value for farmers (e.g. through product innovation). Questions were raised on how human plant protein consumption could be further promoted (e.g. via nutritional education or official diet recommendations). In this context, the discussion covered the different approaches of Member States on how to include and present plant

proteins in their nutritional recommendations. Both, educational, but also economic aspects (e.g. costs of meat versus meat alternatives) are relevant in this discussion. Another topic raised was the potential expansion of the non-GM trend, currently observed in Austria and Germany, to other Member States. The panellists also recognised the important role of various regional and local solutions existing throughout Europe, which contribute to re-balance the protein needs.

High Level Panel

The second day started with a high-level panel by Federal Minister Elisabeth Köstinger, Commissioner Phil Hogan, and Member of the European Parliament, Ulrike Müller. Minister Köstinger highlighted the importance of protein crops and the positive developments in Austria. She proposed to set up a cooperation network on protein plants between interested Member States that want to further develop their protein crops. Commissioner Hogan believes that the Commission Report is an important milestone in the discussion on how to develop plant proteins in Europe. He highlighted the five actions outlined in the report to further strengthen this sector. MEP Müller reported on the reflections in the European Parliament and underlined as well the importance of an increased EU self-sufficiency for plant proteins and the need to make use of various sources of plant proteins available in Europe. She also emphasised the importance of new technologies and research and innovation for the further development of the sector.

The panel agreed that growing EU plant proteins has considerable potential: economically, environmentally and socially. However, to make their production economically viable and profitable for European farmers, not only policy instruments will unlock this potential but consumers need to reward higher production standards on EU food markets.

Stakeholders' Perspective

Finally, different stakeholders from the farming sector, the feed industry, the civil society and research community presented their views on the development of plant proteins in the EU. They confirm the development potential in the premium feed and food sector emphasising that consumer trends increasingly focus on more sustainable and healthy diets, from which European plant proteins benefit. Participants and stakeholders raised the issue of a more sustainable meat consumption, including the shift to "less but better meat" and how this would affect farmers' income (e.g. through specialisation on premium products). The question on the need to re-balance between animal- and plant-based protein consumption was also raised.

The panellists underlined that a broad and coherent policy framework would be supportive for protein crops and agreed that a long-term research agenda would be appreciated to foster further development. They stressed the importance to reach a critical mass of production volume in order to make investments in breeding and supply chain infrastructure (e.g. storage and processing facilities) profitable. This discussion reflected different views on new breeding techniques and their potential impact on competitiveness. Some participants also requested to include proteins from other sources, e.g. from the starch industry, marine resources and insects, in future discussions on the subject.

The conference concluded with the widely shared understanding among participants that, based on the report, the discussions and collaboration among stakeholders, administration and the European Commission should continue to help unlock economic potential for EU-grown plant proteins.